

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Calif. Poised to Spotlight ELLs Stalled in Schools

By Lesli A. Maxwell

California is poised to become the first state to unmask the extent to which English-language learners languish in public schools for years without ever reaching fluency.

Under a measure that received broad, bipartisan support from the legislature, the state education department would be required to break out and report data annually on long-term English-learners—tens of thousands statewide—for every school district. The measure would also create a common, statewide definition for long-term ELL students. Students at risk of becoming long-term ELLs would also be flagged.

The legislation is awaiting action from Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, who has until Sept. 28 to decide whether to sign the bill.

"At its heart, this is a bill that finally makes these kids visible," said Shelly Spiegel-Coleman, the executive director of Californians Together, a research and advocacy group based in Long Beach. It brought the issue of long-term English-learners to light two years ago with a **report** that was the first to put a number on just how many such students were in the state's public schools.

That study found that 59 percent of secondary school English-learners in the state fit the definition of a long-term English-learner: a student in grades 6-12 who has been enrolled in American schools for more than six years, has been stuck at the same level of English proficiency for two or more years as measured by the state's proficiency exam, and scores poorly on California's yearly test of English/language arts.

Across the K-12 spectrum, roughly 1.5 million students enrolled in public schools in California—about one in four—are English-language learners, the largest such population of any state.

Margarita Calderón, a professor emerita of education and educational research at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, has worked with the New York City public schools on identifying and working with long-term English-learners there. She said that if California adopted the statewide policy on such students, "it would be an important development for the whole field.

"We need more states and cities to take this work on and to stop lumping these kids all together," she said. "Their needs are very different."

[Back to Story](#)



## Districts Lead the Way

If the legislation is signed into law, it will come as momentum for tackling the problem of long-term ELLs has been building in a small number of districts across California.

Rattled by their own data revealing that large numbers of English-learners had been stuck at low or intermediate levels of language proficiency and were some of the lowest-achieving students, districts such as Tracy in the Central Valley and Anaheim in Orange County have recently created middle and high school courses that are designed to address the specific needs of long-term ELLs.

Chief among the sources of their learning gaps: a lack of formal, academic language and long-standing disengagement from school.

"The response from districts across the board has been, 'Oh my goodness, you're right—we've got to do something about this,' " said Laurie Olsen, the researcher who wrote the Californians Together study on long-term English-learners. The group is scheduled to publish a follow-up report from Ms. Olsen this week that highlights four California districts where efforts are under way to improve instruction and outcomes for long-term ELLs.

"The energy and creativity is really encouraging," she said.

But Ms. Olsen said that without a statewide policy defining long-term English-learners and a reporting requirement that separates them from the larger ELL category, California schools will fall short of making real progress with such students. Some districts won't act, she said, until it becomes "part of what they are expected to do."

"That's why the legislation is important, because right now what's happening is haphazard, and it's not of the quality and coherence we need in order to see real, systemic improvement," she said.

To move the legislation forward, proponents had to agree to remove more-aggressive provisions that would have required districts to incorporate strategies to address long-term ELLs in school improvement plans and send notifications to parents of students who were at risk of becoming long-term English-learners, Ms. Spiegel-Coleman said.

Getting approval for any legislation that would be seen as imposing a new mandate or additional costs on districts has been virtually impossible in California, where the fallout from the recession has hit particularly hard.



In another ALAS classroom in the district, 7th grader David Ortega focuses on his class work at Earl Williams Middle School.

—Manny Crisostomo for Education Week

The California education department took no official position on the bill, but Karen Cadiero-Kaplan, who heads the agency's English-learner division, said the efforts already under way in individual districts would ultimately bring about more improvement for long-term ELLs.

"If we, as a department, had been prescribing this, I'm not sure we would be seeing the type of creative thinking and innovative approaches," she said. "This has been taken up at the grassroots level instead of the other way around, and if we can have these innovative models coming from the districts themselves, the better off we will be."

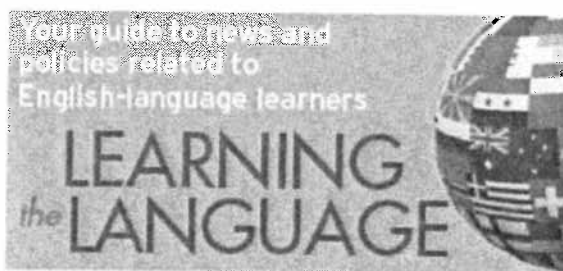
### 'Fired Up' Teachers

Carol Anderson-Woo, the director of curriculum, accountability, and continuous improvement in the 16,000-student Tracy school district, said that when teachers there learned that nearly 55 percent of ELLs in the district's middle and high schools were stuck in the long-term rut, they got "fired up" to do something.

A district-wide committee began debating and planning how to address the problem and created the Academic and Language Support program, known as ALAS, which was piloted in five schools in 2011-12.

The centerpiece of the program is a course taught to long-term ELLs as an elective in tandem with their core English/language arts class. The ALAS class provides instruction meant to develop more formal, academic English across all content areas; it focuses heavily on writing and fostering stronger study skills such as note-taking.

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Teachers also set concrete goals with students to help motivate them and try to build relationships with them and their parents.

"We have really zeroed in on developing their writing, academic-language, and critical-reading strategies," Ms. Anderson-Woo said.

As the district's effort moves into the second year, there are still challenges to confront, Ms. Anderson-Woo said, including more curriculum development and the staffing for the course. When possible, the students' mainstream English teacher also teaches the ALAS course, but scheduling has made that difficult, she said.

Another critical issue, Ms. Anderson-Woo said, has been winning over the students themselves.

Many long-term English-learners—especially those in high school—are reluctant to give up time that could be spent in another elective course and worry about the stigma from being in a course that they don't think they need, she said. Others are accustomed to sitting silent in class, never speaking or participating.

"Many of those students have felt safe staying in their [English-learner] track, so we have to make the case to them that this is not what they need," Ms. Anderson-Woo said.

The Tracy district has no hard data yet to examine what impact the course had on students who took it last year, but Ms. Anderson-Woo said anecdotes from teachers are powerful.

"What kids are communicating is that they appreciate that someone is really trying to help them, and that there are other students who are just like them," she said. "These are kids who have failed repeatedly and often have to be convinced that they are not stupid."

Ms. Olsen, the author of the Californians Together studies, said that when districts develop a support course for long-term ells, rigor is imperative. For much of those students' schooling, the content has been watered down, she said.



It's also important for the course curriculum to be aligned with their regular classes, she said, so that students "see the connection and how this course will help them with everything else."

Similarly, the students need straight talk from their teachers about why they have been stuck as long-term ells and what exactly they need to do to be reclassified as fluent in English, she said.

"Then these students can start to see the possibilities for themselves," Ms. Olsen said. "They can go to college and dream about it and know that they have people who are going to help get them there."

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